

Tapes Reveal Johnson Torn By Democrats' Racial Split

Statement Shows He Considered Not Running in 1964

10/19/97

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Lyndon B. Johnson, despairing over personal attacks and worried that the Democratic Party would split along racial lines because of the civil rights movement, drafted a statement before the party's 1964 convention bemoaning his own shortcomings as a leader and saying he would be "absolutely unavailable" as a candidate for president, according to a new book of Johnson White House tapes.

"I am absolutely positive that I cannot lead the South and the North," Johnson told George Reedy, his press secretary, during an Oval Office conversation on the morning of Aug. 25, 1964. "I am very convinced that the Negroes will not listen to me. They are not going to follow a white Southerner. And I think the stakes are too big to try to compromise."

Twenty minutes later, Johnson told another aide, Walter Jenkins, that although he would be charged with "cowardice" in not running, "I've had doubts about whether a man born where I was born, raised like I was raised, could ever satisfy the Northern Jews and Catholics and Union people."

After listening to Johnson read a draft of the statement, Reedy replied: "This will throw the nation into quite an uproar, sir."

During his six years in the White House, Johnson taped not only his telephone conversations but also selected Oval Office meetings. Tapes released recently have provided insight into Johnson's public positions and private musings on themes from the escalation of the war in Vietnam to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Several previously unscrutinized tapes are included in "Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964," a new book edited by historian Michael R. Beschloss that is the most comprehensive collection so far of transcripts from Johnson's tapes.

The transcripts in the book, mostly taken from conversations during Johnson's first nine months in office, catch the former president in various poses of deal-making, manipulation, good humor, self doubt, suspicion and reflection on his place in history.

Some of the transcripts suggest that Johnson was aware of illicit financial dealings. For example, the week after he became president, following Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, LBJ phoned Jesse Kellam, the general manager of Texas Broadcasting Co. in Austin, Tex., the Johnson family-owned radio and television station there. In that conversation, after asking, "Can I talk pretty freely on this line?" Kellam discusses how he was "taking care of" Cliff Carter, then Johnson's political operative in Texas "with fifteen hundred."

The money apparently supplemented Carter's pay as a vice presidential aide, according to Beschloss.

When a Senate Rules Committee began to look into Johnson's money and his business holdings, he met on Jan. 27, 1964, with four of his top advisers to determine whether a statement should be put out about his finances.

At one point, when aides including Bill Moyers, then press secretary, appeared to be recommending disclosure, Johnson responded, "I just don't like to go against your judgment 'cause you've got to defend me. If I don't follow your advice, I'm going to be in a hell of a shape. But if I do follow it, I'm going to jail! And that's the way I look at it."

Also evident in the transcripts is Johnson's suspicion of Robert F. Kennedy. When the Washington Star published a story that Johnson was worth \$9 million, Johnson told Reedy where he thought the information had come from. "I think that there's no question but what Bobby and his group have got the Star," he said.

Johnson particularly saw Kennedy's hand in the problems he had with blacks at the 1964 convention. In an Aug. 24, 1964, phone call from the White House to the leader of conservative Democrats in the South, the late senator Richard Russell (D-Ga.), Johnson said: disagreement with blacks over the pace of civil rights had caused him to stay away from the convention. Referring to Kennedy, Johnson said, "He's trying to get me in it every way he can. And I think this is Bobby's trap."

The transcripts show Johnson going to particular lengths to extract a pledge of loyalty from his 1964 running mate, Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey.

On July 30, 1964, the day before Johnson publicly announced he would not pick a Cabinet member as vice president—thereby eliminating Robert Kennedy—LBJ asked James Rowe, a Washington attorney who was one of his closest friends and a confidant of Humphrey's, to call the Minnesota senator. Johnson's purpose was to show he was leaning toward Humphrey and lay out some of his demands for his vice president.

After outlining the qualities he expected, Johnson said of Humphrey, in a typical LBJ turn of phrase, "And if he don't want to be my wife, he oughtn't marry me."

Less than an hour later, Humphrey called LBJ with Rowe in his office and said: "I want to come right to the point. If your judgement leads you to select me, I can assure you—unqualifiedly, personally, and with all the sincerity in my heart—complete loyalty."

Despite Johnson's misgivings prior to the 1964 election, he and Humphrey defeated Barry Goldwater and William E. Miller in a landslide.